Exiting fieldwork 'with Grace': reflections on the unintended consequences of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships

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Exiting Fieldwork 'with Grace':
Reflections on the Unintended Consequences of Participant Observation and Researcher-Participant Relationships

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the methodological importance of how researchers exit fieldwork to draw attention to implications for participant and researcher wellbeing.

Design/methodology/approach – Reflecting in detail on one researcher's final six-months exiting fieldwork at a retirement village, this paper critically examines the unintended consequences of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships.

Findings – The paper illustrates that difficulties to exit fieldwork can be unintended consequences of participant observation activities and developing researcher-participant relationships. Our findings also discuss how fieldwork exit can impose upon participant and researcher wellbeing.

Originality/value – Even though researchers acknowledge fieldwork is social and personal by nature, little research attention has been paid to the management of researcher-participant relationships and the exit stage of fieldwork. This paper discusses and addresses this blind-spot in marketing research.

Research limitations/implications – The findings are built upon fieldwork at a retirement village where the researcher served as a volunteer. Thus, our discussion focuses on participant observation activities that are likely to lead to close researcher-participant relationships. However, this paper aims to serve as a useful resource for researchers when considering how to exit their unique fieldwork contexts 'with grace'.

Practical implications – The paper provides practical suggestions to help marketing researchers, such as ethnographers, to manage fieldwork exits with participant and researcher wellbeing concerns in mind.

Social implications – The practical suggestions provided by this paper aim to enable marketing researchers to exit fieldwork contexts 'with grace' through reflection and proactive management of the social impacts of their research activities.

Keywords

Ethnography, Fieldwork, Participant Observation, Researcher-Participant Relationships, Research Impact

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to understand fieldwork exit processes and their implications. While there are calls for marketing scholars to critically reflect on the impacts of their research activities on participant and researcher wellbeing (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Davis and Ozanne, 2018; Hamilton *et al.*, 2012; Jafari *et al.*, 2013), discussions over managing relationships formed with participants and the exit stage of fieldwork are underdeveloped. In contrast, methodological discussions outside of marketing on fieldwork exit are established and point out various ways that participants and researchers can be negatively impacted. For example, participants can have difficulties with no longer being a centre of attention and may expect continued researcher contact after the fieldwork ends (Hall, 2014; Kindon and Cupples, 2003; Ortiz, 2004). Others may even feel like they have been 'used' when researchers abruptly disappear from their lives (Morrison *et al.*, 2012). Meanwhile researchers themselves may bear impacts related to their own exit such as feelings of 'owing' participants for their time, to guilt when believing they have exploited participants to collect their data (Hall, 2009; Ortiz, 2004). The seriousness of these potential wellbeing impacts necessitates an exploration of fieldwork exit in methodological discussions in marketing.

The purpose of this paper is to bring to attention the methodological importance of *how* marketing researchers exit their fieldwork contexts, and practical implications for participant and researcher wellbeing. Our main argument is that two fieldwork activities, *participant observation* and developing *researcher-participant relationships* (Boote and Matthews, 1999; Edirisingha *et al.*, 2017; Hein *et al.*, 2011; Lee and Broderick, 2007; Nash *et al.*, 2020) have unintended consequences which manifest as particular difficulties when exiting fieldwork. Both fieldwork activities often go hand-in-hand to enable authentic and rich descriptions of a studied context. Developing relationships grants us, researchers, the opportunity to immerse in participants' worlds to conduct participant observation. Meanwhile, the quality of the participant observation carried out is dependent on our relationships with participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). In this process, participants and researchers develop sincere interests in each other's lives through meaningful conversations and shared experiences over the course of the fieldwork (Boccagni, 2011; Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007). However, if such activities are successful in relationally entangling participants

and researchers, we argue they can later make it difficult for fieldwork activities to be wrapped up in a way that does not impose upon the wellbeing of both parties.

We critically reflect on these social and practical complexities associated with participant observation and researcher-participant relationships in marketing fieldwork. In this paper, we offer a 'confessional tale' (Barley, 1990) of the unintended consequences of these two fieldwork activities and how they may lead to difficulties during exit. Our reflections centre upon the first author's six-month process of exiting ethnographic fieldwork at a retirement village (Franco, 2020). While crafting these reflections, both authors have proactively investigated and managed concerns regarding his exit's likely consequences on participants and himself as a researcher. The insights we share are informed by our reflective fieldnotes regarding the first author's exit process as it unfolded.

Our stories of exit are most relevant to fieldwork where the researcher repeatedly socialises with participants over a prolonged period of time (e.g., 12+ months). Fieldwork projects with these characteristics are more typical in socioculturally-oriented marketing ethnographies (e.g., Arnould, 1998; Canniford, 2005; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). With this in mind, we acknowledge that the circumstances we describe may not be as prevalent in market and commercial ethnographies that rarely feature a regular set of participants and/or are shorter in duration due to cost and timing concerns (e.g., Agafonoff, 2006; Boddy, 2009; Cayla and Arnould, 2013; Elliot and Jankel-Elliot, 2003; Mariampolski, 2006; Pring, 2007). As such, we still intend for the 'backstage' perspective we share (Fine, 1993) to serve as a useful resource for researchers conducting any form of fieldwork to consider, as it brings numerous potential social and wellbeing impacts of research activities to attention.

This paper is organised as follows: First, we review methodological discussions of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships, and combine nascent insights on fieldwork exit in marketing with reflections on this topic from other disciplines. Second, we offer a critical reflection on the first author's participant observation activities and relationships developed during his fieldwork at a retirement village. Third, we extend these reflections to identify how fieldwork exit may adversely impact participants and researchers. In this section, we offer suggestions on how to 'exit with grace'– an

aspirational goal we propose which calls on researchers to reflect on, and manage, their fieldwork exits and their wellbeing impacts. Last, we conclude by outlining this paper's contributions, limitations and future research directions.

Researcher-participant relationships and participant observation in fieldwork

We organise our literature review by comparing participant observation and researcher-participant relationships between the fieldwork stages of entry and exit. By explaining the changing practical emphases of these activities across these stages, we show some of their unintended consequences which can emerge later into fieldwork. Moreover, with nascent methodological discussions on fieldwork exit in marketing we introduce interdisciplinary insights on this topic to inform an understanding of its wellbeing impacts on participants and researchers.

Fieldwork entry

Participant observation and researcher-participant relationships are crucial activities early into fieldwork as researchers attempt to access and immerse themselves into their context of study. *Participant observation* describes the process in which researchers learn about the people under study in their natural settings, through observing and participating in their activities (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002). As a fieldwork approach, participant observation falls under the ethnographic research tradition in marketing, with roots in cultural and social anthropology (Boddy, 2011; Canniford, 2005). The idea is that through spending time alongside participants, participant observation enables researchers to observe and partake in a wide variety of purchase and use situations in situ as they occur (Boddy, 2011; Mariampolski, 2006, p.10). Such experiences assist researchers to reconcile between what participants say (e.g., in interviews) and what they actually do (Boddy, 2011; Boote and Matthews, 1999). To conduct participant observation, researchers must find a role in the field that grants them opportunities to become involved (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). For example, marketing researchers have participated alongside consumers and market actors in various contexts, such as attending craft beer festivals (Maciel and Fischer, 2020) to surfing around the

world (Canniford, 2005). Participation enables researchers to not only observe consumption and markets in action, but also to experience them first-hand more or less akin to participants (Boddy, 2009). It is through these experiences that researchers can develop faithful accounts and insights into participants' consumption activities and entanglements with markets (Belk *et al.*, 2012).

Participant observation goes hand-in-hand with the development of *researcher-participant relationships* during fieldwork entry – a concept which captures the nature and quality of the relationship between a researcher and a participant as it evolves over the course of fieldwork (Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007). For example, initiating and nurturing relationships with 'gatekeepers' is required for researchers to obtain entry to fields that are not publicly accessible and to be granted opportunities to conduct participant observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Nuttathavusit, 2019). These relationships can be intimate as illustrated by researchers being granted entry to private contexts such as professional trade-shows (Tumbat and Belk, 2011), informal club meet-ups (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995), to family activities at home (Nash *et al.*, 2020). Researchers may additionally build relationships by taking on formal and institutional roles in fields. For instance, researchers have volunteered in educational settings (Adkins and Ozanne, 2005) and have joined the boards of consumption clubs and organisations (Kozinets, 2001). These examples show that research insights developed from private settings are only possible through nurturing relationships with participants that enable participant observation activities.

While we are aware of the importance and practical benefits of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships, we are less sensitised to consider how they evolve over time and the tensions they may cause when researchers begin their process of exiting fieldwork. We next discuss this nascent topic in marketing research with an eye towards examining fieldwork exit's potential wellbeing impacts upon participants and researchers.

Fieldwork exit

At best, fieldwork exit is discussed in relation to *theoretical saturation* which gives researchers an indication of *when* to exit fieldwork (e.g., Belk *et al.*, 2012). Theoretical saturation is achieved when the

researcher observes similar instances (Saunders *et al.*, 2018) as 'additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes' (Given, 2015, p.135). At this point in time, the data collection is expected to wrap up and the researcher is advised to exit and end their fieldwork activities. While advice on when to exit is certainly useful, there is limited discussion on *how* researchers can go about exiting their fieldwork. That is, few studies consider the management of researcher-participant relationships and participant observation activities during the later stages of fieldwork.

We note two mentions of exit in marketing that suggest unintended implications of researcher-participant relationships and participant observation for participants during later fieldwork stages. Edirisingha *et al.* (2017) explain that exit might incur social demands when relationships involve the sharing of personal and intimate information, and the development of sincere friendships. Researchers may have to conduct 'post-data collection' activities to gradually reduce the intensity of these relationships to prevent participants from feeling exploited (p.427). Similarly, Nuttathavusit (2019) finds that participants in certain cultural contexts may expect some form of continued interaction after the fieldwork ends. Both mentions hint that ending participant observation and transitioning out of relationships can impact participants. These discussions motivate wellbeing considerations beyond a research-oriented perspective on fieldwork, consistent with growing emphases on this topic in marketing (Davis and Ozanne, 2018).

Researcher-participant relationships and participant observation can also lead to unintended consequences for researchers during exit. Hamilton *et al.* (2012) point out inner conflicts for researchers, as they tussle between personal commitments to their participants and the practical challenges of sensitively writing about their worlds as they exit fieldwork. In particular, these researchers fear reducing participants to dehumanised 'consumers' or 'informants' as necessitated by publishing research articles. Our aim in this paper is to build upon these studies by illustrating a fuller range of wellbeing impacts on participants and researchers that may occur during exit. To pursue this objective, we next introduce interdisciplinary discussions of fieldwork exit to marketing research.

Fieldwork exit has been reflected upon extensively outside of marketing and illustrates the social and practical complexities of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships. Such

discussions resonate across medical sociology (Watts, 2008), social work (Iversen, 2009), to human geography (Hall, 2014). Though part of this literature naturally discusses the benefits of considering exit processes to improve research outputs (e.g., Michailova *et al.*, 2014), our focus is rather on wellbeing concerns and managing the social impacts of fieldwork. This focus serves to develop our argument that participant observation and developing researcher-participant relationships can lead to circumstances that warrant considerations of participant and researcher wellbeing during exit.

First, researcher-participant relationships featuring intimate personal bonds can make it difficult for participants to comprehend or accept the researcher's diminishing social presence as they exit. Past research has shown that participants can experience difficulties going back to being 'strangers' with the researcher when fieldwork ends (Hall, 2014). For this reason, some may expect continued contact beyond the fieldwork (Kindon and Cupples, 2003). Occasionally, participants experience disappointments with no longer being a centre of attention, or difficulties adjusting to no longer having someone around to confide their feelings (Ortiz, 2004). At extremes, exit can feel like a 'break-up' due to emotional attachments developed over time (Morrison *et al.*, 2012). All of these painful feelings can emerge when researchers begin their processes of exiting fieldwork.

Second, researchers can experience the unintended consequences of fieldwork exit. While it is advised for researchers to maintain a professional perspective towards the participants they study (Barley, 1990), many inevitably become emotionally invested (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012). These emotions can range from researchers feeling like they 'owe' participants for their time as part of the fieldwork, to guilt and anxiety from feeling they are benefitting from the relationship more than their participants (Kindon and Cupples, 2003; Ortiz, 2004). These feelings may be amplified when spending time with vulnerable populations such as children and adolescents (Hall, 2014; Morrison *et al.*, 2012), and those living in poverty or experiencing health difficulties (Iversen, 2009; Watts, 2008). In these situations, researchers can struggle with competing demands of being objective versus subjective, sympathetic versus detached, being friendly versus honest (Fine, 1993). This range of feelings attests that researchers can also be impacted by their fieldwork (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012; Jafari *et al.*, 2013), making exit a potentially heart-wrenching experience.

These studies suggest that researcher-participant relationships may bear tensions towards the end of participant observation, potentially imposing difficulties upon both parties during exit. Accordingly, this paper aims to bring fieldwork exit and some of its precursors to the awareness of marketing researchers. At a general level, we expect that the research projects most susceptible to the concerns we discuss over the following sections are those that involve increasing combinations of: (i) repeated social interactions with participants over prolonged participant observation (ii) developing personal and intimate researcher-participant relationships; and (iii) participants belonging to vulnerable populations. In the next section, we describe the fieldwork which informs the reflections we share in this paper. This research context features extents of all three susceptibilities to fieldwork exit concerns we have listed above.

Illustrative research context

The study we have reflected upon employed ethnographic fieldwork methods (Arnould, 1998; Elliot and Jankel-Elliot, 2003) to explore the technology adoption and consumption experiences of older consumers at a retirement village (Franco, 2020). This study was part of the first author's PhD thesis and studied how village residents learnt to use contemporary technology products in their everyday lives such as smartphones, tablets and laptops. The first author spent 18 months visiting the village on a weekly basis conducting participant observation as a volunteer 'technology helper'. Our reflections chronicle the first author's journey from entering to exiting his fieldwork at the village.

During the last six months of the ethnography, the first author began collegiate discussions with the second author about his fieldwork. Our discussions identified concerns associated with his eventual exit from the village and the risks of leaving his participants 'behind' after finishing his tech-help activities. We decided to conduct joint data collection aimed at triangulating the first author's fieldwork exit process through developing insider and outsider perspectives. The data consists of reflective fieldnotes developed by both authors. The first author kept fieldnotes which documented his visits to the retirement village and reflections on his relationships with participants. The second author took a back seat in accompanying the first author on village visits with the primary goal of observing his participant observation activities and

interactions with participants. The second author's presence was explained to residents in terms of her interests to 'shadow' the first author in order to learn more about his tech-helper role. The second author was warmly received by residents and other volunteers at the retirement village. Besides being another friendly researcher/volunteer residents could chat with, she minimised the impacts of her observer role by not participating in the provision of tech-help (unless a resident sought help from her). The reflective fieldnotes of both authors were analysed to develop the findings (see Hamilton *et al.*, 2012; Jafari *et al.*, 2013).

Retirement village and participant profile

The participants are 27 residents who attended weekly technology help sessions of 60 to 90 minutes hosted by the first author at a retirement village in Melbourne, Australia. The residents were over the age of 60 and were from middle to upper class backgrounds, with most having retired from professional careers in the arts, academia and business. Pseudonyms are used for all those we discuss in this paper. The village has various clubs and social activities, and provides shared facilities such as a library, cafeteria and function hall. Moreover, it has a vibrant community culture sustained by residents and management. This gated community is selective and has a long waiting list of applicants. The first author selected the village to explore older consumers' technology consumption experiences as it was unlike previous contexts studied such as assisted care facilities or at home with family carers (cf. Walsh and Callan, 2011).

Fieldwork entry: Participant observation and relationship building

The first author obtained field access to the village to conduct participant observation through nurturing researcher-participant relationships with gatekeepers. He learnt about the village through 'Molly' – a participant in a related study who was volunteering her tech-help services to residents. Through this relationship, the first author was introduced to village management and was soon granted access as a fellow tech-help volunteer. Alongside Molly, he hosted weekly tech-help sessions at the village library.

Through the weekly tech-help sessions, the first author conducted participant observation and became immersed into the village community. Most commonly he coached the basic operations of devices such as smartphones and laptops, like making and receiving calls, organising digital calendar appointments, and the use social media apps (e.g., Facebook, Whatsapp). Occasionally, he troubleshooted technical issues, such as problems connecting to the village Wi-Fi. Through these activities, the first author built a number of relationships, particularly with the regular session attendees, and Molly, the other volunteer.

The growth of these relationships at the tech-help sessions are captured in the excerpt below, soon after the first author started keeping reflective fieldnotes:

> I'm noticing how close I've gotten to the regulars that turn up every week and Molly over the course of the fieldwork. It's not formal anymore like the first couple of months where residents shyly asked for help... We now greet each other with a hug, saying "Morning! How are you? How's your week?" We catch up and share stories while talking about their tech. **(Fieldnotes, First Author)**

As seen in this excerpt, consistent with prior literature on participant observation and researcher-participant relationships, the first author, his regular participants and Molly developed more personal relationships during the tech-help sessions (Boccagni, 2011; Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007). Interactions at the sessions extended beyond discussions of technology to intimate conversations about each other's families, interests and life experiences. By this time, about a year into the fieldwork, the first author considered this handful of residents who attended the sessions every week and Molly as friends, akin to close work colleagues that see each other regularly. Moreover, he considered the numerous others who sporadically attended as acquaintances of good rapport, with conversations only occasionally going beyond his research focus on their technology adoption and consumption experiences.

These relationships transformed the first author's pre-fieldwork presumptions about older people (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012). Initially he was attentive to residents' physical and cognitive wellbeing based on portrayals of older consumers in prior technology literatures, and his personal experiences visiting his grandmother at an assisted care facility. These stereotypical views were dispelled by his relationships (Niemelä-Nyrhinen, 2007). The vast majority of residents were confident, open to sharing their stories and

did not have impairments that stifled their uses of technologies. The second author noted similar observations when accompanying him on a visit to the village:

> Residents were active, happy, positive, and social. Everything that I wouldn't normally associate with a retirement village. As [the first author] said, "it's a special place and it has a lot to do with the people there". This made me curious to find out more... **(Fieldnotes, Second Author)**

With the development of more personal and intimate relationships over time, the first author observed that residents did experience some vulnerability on the basis of technological literacy. That is, rather than ageing being the reason residents were less able to use technologies, it was more that they were unfamiliar with products that have come onto the market since leaving the workforce. Compounding this issue was a lack of ready access to resources and training designed towards residents' learning needs, which moreover did not patronise them in the process.

Inadvertently, the first author discovered that the coaching he offered participants addressed this training gap and enabled positive learning outcomes (Franco, 2020). Many participants became comfortable asking for help, despite being apologetic at the start of the fieldwork. Thus, the sessions not only provided tech-help, but also social and emotional support. By this time, the first author felt he had earned his participants' trust through his focus to develop researcher-participant relationships while conducting participant observation. Moreover, he felt satisfied as he was developing insights for his research while supporting the wellbeing of his participants.

Fieldwork exit concerns

Participants' growing dependence on the researcher

Deeper into the fieldwork, participants became more able to use their technologies. This shift was a result of the coaching provided at the weekly tech-help sessions. For example, one resident learnt to use the calendar feature of her smartphone to manage her activity schedule, while another started using her iPad and wireless printer as part of creating art installations for the village. Many others became frequent social media users. The first author was excited that participants were getting more out of their technologies:

> Jacinta's made a lot of progress in using Google maps. I'm very proud of her! I think she'll be ready to use her iPhone on her upcoming Europe trip... I also continued coaching Miles on how to text message. He messaged his granddaughter for the first time and she responded back immediately. Miles was pretty excited about that! **(Fieldnotes, First Author)**

While the first author was excited at his participants' growing tech-uses, we developed concerns they were becoming dependent on his services. We were mindful that participants were still mastering their devices, and required frequent coaching and troubleshooting help. It was evident that the first author's exit and the cessation of his participant observation would impact on their continued abilities to use technologies. For example, the first author worried what might happen to one of his participants and the flow-on impacts for Molly, his tech-help session co-host.

> Jacinta is still learning how to use her iPhone for her Europe trip. Let's say I end the fieldwork today. I'm worried she'd run into trouble during her trip as she's intending to use her iPhone – she's still mastering how to take photos, navigate around, and stay in touch with family. What happens when I really have to go? Molly will still be here, but I know she'd be overwhelmed dealing with my share of the tech-help commitments we've made to Jacinta and others. I can't do that to Molly either... **(Fieldnotes, First Author)**

These concerns are symptoms of participants' growing dependence on the first author's services which helped sustain their expanding uses of technologies. We could see this dependence through the words of residents, as they often remarked they 'wouldn't know what they'd do without [him]' (Fieldnotes, First Author). The second author also noted that this dependence was on the radar of village management:

> We bumped into Jan, the volunteer coordinator. She shared her concerns that they were dependent on [first author] and needed more tech-help volunteers. It struck me how embedded [first author] was and that he has ongoing tasks and responsibilities at the village. **(Fieldnotes, Second Author)**

These relationships additionally had social and emotional complexities. Participants expressed that they were empowered by the first author's reliable presence at the village. Thus, participants were not only technically supported, but socially and emotionally too when it came to their devices. This comfort is captured by Emilia at the end of an ethnographic interview: "I always look forward to the next session. It's just relieving to know that you're coming next week and yes, I can ask you! It makes such a difference." Such unintended dependencies on the first author's participant observation activities were exacerbated by

his researcher-participant relationships. Not wanting to adversely impact participants and the other tech-help volunteer, he wrestled over when and how to exit the fieldwork, as we explain next.

Avoiding adversely impacting participants and research pressures

Theoretical saturation was achieved 15-months into the fieldwork. The first author felt that his visits to the village had become routine, his fieldnotes shorter, and that his thesis findings had stabilised (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). The first author and his PhD supervisors agreed it was time to exit the fieldwork.

However, the first author felt anxiety at the thought of ending the participant observation due to concerns over what would happen to his participants. He wanted to avoid harming or inconveniencing the residents who had made his thesis research possible. These worries are illustrated in the following fieldnotes:

> I'm done collecting data... I feel I'm spending too much time here at the village when I should be finishing up my thesis. I'm still here because I care about the residents who've put me in this good position to begin with. But I'm worried that when I leave, they'll find it hard to keep learning new things, and they might run into trouble with their current tech-uses... this might disrupt various things they've grown accustomed to doing day-to-day... **(Fieldnotes, First Author)**

The first author's concerns for participants came into conflict with research pressures he was experiencing. Continued participant observation would compete with the time required to complete his thesis. During the same period, the first author moved house which tripled his commute to the village to 80 minutes each way. Despite these challenges, he continued the participant observation to support his participants while finishing his thesis which caused much stress and exhaustion.

Understanding fieldwork exit and its social and practical complexities

Thus far, we have described the first author's fieldwork circumstances and experiences which have made us attentive to the potential impacts of exit on participants and researchers. Now, we explain how participant observation and researcher-participant relationships can be the source of such challenges by proposing the conceptual framework in Figure 1 below. This framework enables an understanding of how and why the

interests of both parties align and misalign during different stages of fieldwork. In particular, we highlight that a divergence of interests may emerge and intensify nearer to the researcher's exit from fieldwork.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Aligned interests in researcher-participant relationships during fieldwork entry

During earlier stages of fieldwork, relationships deepen as participant and researcher interests are aligned, with participant observation facilitating the exchange of mutual benefits related to the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). It is these participant observation activities that enable immersion into the field and drives the development of research insights. For example, the researcher exchanged his tech-help services to residents for their stories of technology adoption and consumption experiences. These stories helped generate part of his PhD thesis dataset and its findings. During this time these exchanges additionally offered participants emotional and social support for their technology uses as relationships developed. Such exchanges show how participant observation and the development of researcher-participant relationships often go hand-in-hand during fieldwork.

However, our attentiveness to the practical and social complexities of fieldwork illuminates that participant observation and developing relationships can encourage the formation of personal and intimate relationships beyond the purposes of the research. In short, researcher-participant relationships can even align both parties' personal interests in each other through the development of empathy and friendships (Edirisingha *et al.*, 2017; Hamilton *et al.*, 2012). For example, the researcher and several participants spent considerable time together week-to-week at the tech-help sessions, sharing stories about their families, passions and life experiences – developing sincere interests in each other's lives (Boccagni, 2011; Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007). It is these personal and intimate relationships which can especially lead to difficulties when researchers later exit fieldwork.

Diverged research interests in researcher-participant relationships during fieldwork exit

Researcher interests are likely to diverge to those of participants when theoretical saturation nears and is achieved. We consider this phase of fieldwork when interests in the research activities themselves diverge as a blind-spot of prior methodological discussions in marketing (e.g., Belk *et al.*, 2012). Previous discussions obscure participants' interests in the research once they become involved and researcher-participant relationships are developed. For most studies, theoretical saturation is used as an indication that the data collection is complete and the researcher should soon end their participant observation activities. However, participants by this time may have grown to rely on the benefits they receive from being part of the research (e.g., attention, a confidant). Thus, in our illustrative context, the researcher's prioritisation of his research interests to exit and work on his thesis came into conflict with participants who prefer that his tech-help services continue. What complicates this divergence of research interests are that personal interests in each other may remain for both parties after theoretical saturation due to the intimate relationships formed over the course of the fieldwork.

Difficulties to exit: Research interests versus personal interests

Fieldwork exit can be challenging when researchers and participants share personal interests to uphold their relationships beyond the research. Both parties may be emotionally uncomfortable with the participant observation ending and no longer spending as much time together (Hall, 2009; Hamilton *et al.*, 2012). As researchers can feel compelled to stay in the field and continue participant observation (Ortiz, 2004), the tensions between research versus personal interests warrant reflection (Fine 1993).

Researchers face a dilemma when dealing with conflicting research and personal interests entangled with researcher-participant relationships and participant observation. On one hand, when researchers prioritise research over personal interests, they may feel emotional impacts as their exit can impose unwanted consequences on participants and damage relationships (Morrison *et al.*, 2012; Ortiz, 2004). On the other hand, when researchers choose to delay exit, they can end up dealing with research pressures such as deadlines and institutional constraints. These may include PhD completion timelines or

patterns of funding and publishing expectations for more established researchers (Hall, 2009; Iversen, 2009; Morrison *et al.*, 2012). However, we propose that these difficulties can be managed if researchers proactively plan and reflect on their researcher-participant relationships and participant observation activities over the course of fieldwork. That is, as we explain next, researchers can benefit from contemplating *how* they exit their fieldwork.

Exiting with grace

We propose that researchers can aspire to 'exit with grace' – where researchers manage their fieldwork exit in a way that considers their interests and those of participants. These participants include all who have become involved in the research activities and those the researcher has formed personal relationships with, such as friends or acquaintances. We intend for this aspirational goal to assist with exit planning than being an ethical directive for all marketing researchers to follow. In this section, we offer practical suggestions which assist researchers to exit with grace that are based on our experiences in enabling the first author to exit his fieldwork successfully. Naturally, the circumstances of the first author's fieldwork project may mean these suggestions have different fits to other research contexts. Thus, we view these suggestions as jumping-off points for researchers to brainstorm how to exit their unique fieldwork contexts with grace. Our suggestions discuss what to consider before starting the fieldwork, and what can be done during its earlier and later stages. Moreover, these suggestions offer specific advice for PhD supervisory teams, early career researchers and those working with vulnerable participants.

First, researchers should consider an exit plan as part of their research design protocols before starting the fieldwork (Morrison *et al.*, 2012). This plan should assess the likelihood that the envisioned participant observation and relationship building activities foster attachments and dependencies between researchers and participants, and the risks associated with an eventual exit. Similar to assessing the positionality of the researcher, researchers may determine the extent of vulnerability of participants based on their social circumstances (e.g., older consumers, less literate consumers) as well as the potential sources contributing to their vulnerability (e.g., ageing/health-related challenges, unfamiliarity with technologies).

Consulting with service providers that have experience with these vulnerable populations (e.g., health practitioners, social workers) may be helpful for assessing what cautions are warranted. As the research unfolds, researchers would also need to be mindful as to how their presence may be shaping participants' vulnerabilities (e.g., fostering dependence) with the exit plan updated to address concerns as they emerge.

Exit plans should also establish regular check-ins between the researchers involved and colleagues that can be sounding boards for concerns as the fieldwork progresses (Watts, 2008). This suggestion is pertinent to PhD supervisory teams and early career researchers, as fieldwork projects at these levels can have long durations (e.g., 12+ months) and feature novice fieldworkers undertaking what can be isolating work. Supervisors and colleagues should thus monitor wellbeing, and the development of participant observation activities and researcher-participant relationships. Check-ins should look for signs that the researchers may be facing dilemmas balancing commitments to participants and research objectives, especially as they near towards fieldwork exit. Exit plans should lastly map out potential actions to take during earlier and later stages of fieldwork such as those we discuss next.

Second, during earlier fieldwork stages, researchers can provide participants an estimate of their intended time in the field and explain how they will be a temporary part of their activities (Hall, 2014; Kindon and Cupples, 2003). In hindsight, the first author would have benefitted from sensitising village residents to his temporary stay to manage any dependencies on his tech-help services as they developed. Timeframes such as PhD completion milestones or ethics approval periods are available to researchers to work with (Hall, 2014; Morrison *et al.*, 2012). Bringing these timeframes to participants' awareness would have allowed the first author to plan achievable learning goals for their time together and manage expectations of how long the participant observation activities would last. We must note that participants being aware of the researcher's temporary stay in the field may risk reducing their willingness to become involved in research projects. However, past studies argue that sensitising participants to timeframes has offsetting benefits which encourage participation. The rationale is that participants gain a clearer idea of how long the researcher will be in the field which better informs their decisions to consent to becoming involved in the research (Hall, 2014; Kindon and Cupples, 2003).

Last, as researchers approach the end of their fieldwork, they may want to signal to participants the end of their stay in the field. Previous research suggests that thank you letters, gifts, certificates of participation and a celebratory meal can help participants recognise that the fieldwork is ending and feel senses of closure (Iversen, 2009; Morrison et al., 2012). In our illustrative research context, we signalled the first author's exit in a different way, through the gradual introduction of a new tech-helper volunteer team in conjunction with village management. This team sought to ensure that residents would continue to benefit from the technology learning outcomes they were experiencing, and to support Molly, the remaining volunteer. We were mindful that while not as vulnerable as initially thought, we wanted to thank residents by supporting their enthusiasm to improve their technological literacy through creating a longer term and more sustainable tech-help service at the village. In so doing, we aimed to proactively address the likely impacts the first author's exit would have otherwise imposed on participants.

We recruited six student volunteers from a marketing course to form the new tech-help volunteering team. The volunteers were trained and incorporated into the weekly sessions with residents. This team assisted the first author to phase out his visits from a weekly to a fortnightly basis at first, and a monthly basis thereafter. The reducing frequency of his visits helped participants get used to his diminishing field presence while minimising any adverse impacts on their activities and wellbeing (Hall, 2014; Kindon and Cupples, 2003). The first author has since exited this fieldwork context, and occasionally liaises with the volunteering team and village management in a remote supporting role. Moreover, he maintains some email and social media contact with a selection of participants after exiting the fieldwork (Edirisingha *et al.*, 2017; Hall, 2009).

Contributions and conclusions

Fieldwork exit has been an overlooked topic in prior methodological discussions in marketing. In this paper, we have shown that thinking about exit uncovers some unintended consequences of participant observation and the development of researcher-participant relationships. We have brought these issues to light through being attentive to participant and researcher wellbeing in our critical reflection on the first author's

experiences of exiting fieldwork at a retirement village. In so doing, we have developed an aspirational goal for researchers to exit their fieldwork contexts 'with grace'. We believe such an approach and the practical suggestions we have provided enable marketing researchers to better manage the immediate social impacts of their fieldwork. We now conclude by discussing this paper's contributions, limitations and future research directions.

The importance of the exit stage of fieldwork in marketing

First and foremost, we highlight exit as an important fieldwork stage while extending nascent insights on this topic in methodological discussions in marketing (Edirisingha *et al.*, 2017; Hamilton *et al.*, 2012; Nuttathavusit, 2019). Rather than focusing on a research-objective perspective on exit in terms of asking *when* to exit fieldwork (cf. Belk *et al.*, 2012), we consider questions over *how* to exit fieldwork. We have motivated this argument by introducing interdisciplinary discussions on exit which illustrate that it can be emotionally difficult and can bear unwanted consequences for both participants and researchers (Hall, 2014; Iversen, 2009; Morrison *et al.*, 2012).

We also make a novel contribution to interdisciplinary literature by elaborating upon previous work which attributes exit difficulties to friendly relationships formed with participants (Hall, 2009; Ortiz, 2004; Watts, 2008). We do so by explaining that exit difficulties can also be seeded by relationships where researchers exchange a service for participants' involvement in the fieldwork. That is, if participants grow dependent on this service provided by researchers, exit difficulties will emerge as the fieldwork ends. Accordingly, this paper suggests that this difficulty, amongst others in prior literature, can have underlying causes in the development of participant observation activities and researcher-participant relationships over the course of fieldwork.

The unintended consequences of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships

While many methodological discussions usefully explain the importance of conducting participant observation and developing researcher-participant relationships early into fieldwork to improve the quality

of research outputs (Belk *et al.*, 2012; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), we demonstrate how these activities can have unintended consequences. These consequences only become apparent when considering the social and practical realities of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships, in that both parties engage in conversations and shared experiences, and develop sincere interests in each other's lives over time (Boccagni, 2011; Pitts and Miller-Day, 2007). We show that these activities can foster personal and intimate relationships of the kind which can lead to fieldwork exit challenges. Such relationships include those that researchers and participants may consider genuine friendships, or in the least, acquaintances with which rapport has been established (see also Edirisingha *et al.*, 2017). By considering how participant observation activities are wrapped up and how relationships are managed, we aspire for researchers to 'exit with grace'. That is, researchers can aspire to exit while reflecting on, and managing, the wellbeing impacts of their fieldwork.

Reflections on managing research impact

This paper responds to calls for marketing researchers to critically reflect on the social impacts of research projects (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Jafari *et al.*, 2013). We have responded by considering the participant and researcher wellbeing impacts of fieldwork, and our endeavours to enable researchers to exit fieldwork with grace. In particular, our suggestions on how to exit with grace resonate with calls to better inform and engage participants throughout fieldwork decisions and activities (Davis and Ozanne, 2018). Our suggestions on how to exit additionally consider researcher wellbeing by accounting for the difficult emotions researchers may experience when transformed and impacted by their participants and fieldwork activities (Hamilton *et al.*, 2012).

Limitations and future research directions

Our discussions of fieldwork exit and the unintended consequences of participant observation and researcher-participant relationships are limited to the retirement village context we have reflected upon. Other contexts likely feature different fieldwork exit risks and challenges. We acknowledge that

volunteering roles are not common in marketing fieldwork, and that ongoing relationships with participants are not always developed by researchers. Likewise, our contributions are most relevant for prolonged academic fieldwork, than for commercial ethnographies in which it is rare to find long-term projects with a regular set of participants due to timing and cost concerns (e.g., Boddy, 2009; Mariampolski, 2006). Future research may benefit from comparing fieldwork challenges between socio-cultural academic research projects and commercial ethnographies, to better attend to their differing contextual circumstances as experienced in practice by researchers. Such comparisons can help develop a fuller range of considerations that assist a wider variety of fieldworkers to carefully navigate researcher-participant relationships and enable 'exits with grace' from their studied contexts.

We also acknowledge that our discussions have not explored an ethical perspective on fieldwork exit, despite our motivations to develop this paper emanating from such deliberations. Our discussions have rather focused on the more immediate practical and personal moral dilemmas of fieldwork (Fine, 1993) when researchers fear their exit may adversely impact participants. Thus, we have suggested practical measures that can enable an 'exit with grace' for likeminded researchers in marketing. We believe that ethical perspectives are necessary in future methodological discussions that seek to build upon our explorations of exit, as we pondered important questions while reflecting on the practical complexities of fieldwork. For instance, we wonder if participants are not necessarily vulnerable before fieldwork begins, but can be *made to be vulnerable* over the course of fieldwork through interactions with researchers (e.g., the provision of services that participants grow dependent upon). Such reflections are warranted as fieldwork encounters often feature power imbalances between researchers and participants (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2009; Davis and Ozanne, 2018). Deliberations over this question, and others, suggest that researchers *should* take responsibility for the social impacts of their research, especially if challenges for participants are likely to emerge and intensify as they exit fieldwork.

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